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### Self-Conscious Narration as the Complex Representation of Hope in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*

#### Abstract

Calls *Always Coming Home* an “open-ended utopia” that presents the possibility of utopia without being specific about the means to get there. The self-reflexive narrator, Pandora, is the “structuring paradox” of a novel that leads the reader to long for a utopia while remaining ambiguous about its possibility.

#### Additional Keywords

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Always Coming Home*; Narrator in *Always Coming Home*; Self-reflexivity in *Always Coming Home*; Utopias and dystopias

# Self-Conscious Narration

## as the Complex Representation of Hope in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*

by Carol Franko

In Ursula K. Le Guin's most recent novel, utopian hope, or longing, is given a more profound status by the presence of doubt. *Always Coming Home* is a utopian fiction self-consciously built on paradoxes. It's about the Kesh people of the Na Valley who "might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California" (xi). Its 500 odd pages contain a multitude of Valley texts – poems, plays, romantic tales, histories, a chapter from a novel called "Dangerous People," as well as "nonliterary" information about their Native American-like culture and what I'll be calling "Pandora sections" where the narrator reflects on her writing of utopia and her relation to the Kesh. The closest thing to a conventional novel in *Always Coming Home* is Stone Telling's narrative, in which she relates how she left the Kesh to live for awhile with her father's people, the patriarchal warlike society of the Condor, before escaping and returning home. Stone Telling's circular journey is a preoccupation of Le Guin's fiction; it chronicles how the falsely spiritual Condor, who, in the Kesh metaphor, live "outside" the world, apparently are destroyed by the poverty of their own values. It might seem that Le Guin has here introduced a threat to the utopian society only to dispose of it in a puzzling easy way. But the questions stimulated by Stone Telling's narrative are only a part of the work's larger paradoxical pattern.

The structuring paradox in *Always Coming Home* is Le Guin's self-conscious, multifaceted narrator, "Pandora." Her name – an epithet of the earth – means "giver of all," and we all remember the story of Pandora's box. Pandora is the anthropologist who, in one of her guises, neutrally presents and comments on the Valley culture. We also see her dramatized as the visitor to utopia, who comes to celebrate an "alien" set of values. Moreover, Le Guin has Pandora reflect repeatedly on her role as constructor of a utopian fiction. Thus the reader becomes involved in the text's self-reflexivity and is caught between the verisimilar wealth of Valley data – which makes the Kesh seem real – and the constant reminder that they are imaginary, the dreamlike creation of Pandora-Le Guin. This basic tension challenges the reader in its various dramatizations, which include Pandora's relation to her text, and to her readers, as well as the Valley people's own sense of their problematic relation to History and Civilisation (Le Guin's spelling).

Le Guin's use of a self-conscious narrator for utopia is an experiment that goes back at least as far as H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905). But self-reflexivity especially characterizes what several critics see as a rebirth of the utopian

genre – you could say utopia has never been the same since *Brave New World*, 1984, or Zamyatin's *We*. Tom Moylan argues that writers like Joanna Russ, Le Guin, Marge Piercy and Samuel Delany use self-reflexivity as one tool for simultaneously destroying and transforming the genre. Critics often refer to this transformed utopia as "open-ended." As Bulent Somay puts it, open-ended utopias not only disarm the "dystopian critique of utopias" (25), they more importantly portray "a utopian locus as a mere phase in the infinite unfolding of the utopian horizon" (260), thus preventing collective utopian longing from being enclosed in a text that presents utopia as finished, static and unchanging (25). Because of this difference, open-ended utopias invite active readers: by definition they demand "a critical negating attitude from the audience" (Somay 34). Frederic Jameson goes so far as to say that contemporary utopias are "about their own impossibility" (1567). Jameson claims that the "deepest vocation" of such works as Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* is "to confront us with our incapacity to imagine Utopia" (156).

In *Always Coming Home* utopian hope achieves seriousness and poignancy through Pandora's and the reader's, doubt. But by her use of a self-conscious narrator Le Guin expresses both the impossibility and the possibility of imagining utopia. Thus this work has a problematic status among recent "critical" or "open" utopian fictions. Because even though Pandora often throws the question of "making" utopia back to the reader – and even though both Pandora and the Kesh people emphatically reveal the gap between civilization and utopia – nonetheless the overall movement is toward effecting the reader's affirmation. Peter Ruppert suggests that an open utopia poses a threat to the constructing of utopia, or at least leaves the project unfinished, so that the reader's cooperation and participation is needed to achieve completion (130). But Somay excludes affirmation or completion from open-ended works, even if that closure is effected only in the reader's mind. If *Always Coming Home* nevertheless does encourage the ongoing, self-critical movement of utopian longing, and I think it does, it does so by balancing affirmation with doubt. The self-conscious edge is not lost – utopia is never "complete," and in some sense any conceiving of a potential link between our world and a radically transformed one is deemed "impossible." Further exploration of Pandora's and the reader's "progress" through *Always Coming Home* will clarify these assertions.

Both Pandora and the reader can be viewed as undergoing circular journeys, which begin with an initial accep-

tance of the Valley as "home," travel through a period of doubt, and arrive at several affirmations – no "final" one – which bring them back "home" to the possibility of imagining the Valley, or utopia. The crisis is dramatized partially in the "Pandora sections," where the narrator depicts herself "worrying" about her liabilities as a utopian writer. But the doubtful continuity of utopia and history is also portrayed in various texts of the Kesh people. The return "home" to utopian hope is likewise dramatized mostly in some of the later Pandora sections. Pandora is depicted as "finding ways" into the Valley and finding confidence to assert her allegiance to utopian values. The reader, whose "crisis" has been partly a vicarious sharing of Pandora's and partly an undergoing of the Valley's satirical image of our society, experiences a likewise "double" resolution: first through Pandora's admission of her need of the reader to imagine utopia, and through the Valley people, making a claim on us directly in a poem written to us.

It is important to note that I am imposing this pattern of Pandora's and the reader's circular journeys onto a work which as I've mentioned is in no way a conventional novel. Aside from Stone Telling's narrative, the collective form of *Always Coming Home* seeks to disallow the kind of unities I'm suggesting. Yet I think there is evidence for seeing more than one circular journey and I'd argue that the fact that they are not all as obvious as Stone Telling's calls for active reading, an important component of "open" utopias.

The introductory section "Towards an Archaeology of the Future" contains the narrator's typical strategies for deflecting her concerns over writing utopia and for drawing the reader into the problem. This section introduces Pandora's suspicion of utopography. For example, she alludes to the inadequacy of traditional utopian thinking when she refers to "several blockheaded opinions – that it must be walled, with one gate, for instance" (3) that have kept her from discovering sooner the double spiral shape of Kesh towns. She finally discovers that there was never a wall – unlike many utopias the Valley does not have that kind of boundary – and that what she had taken for a gate was a *bridge*, or "hinge," over creeks.

Besides criticizing traditional utopias, Pandora attempts to transcend the paradoxes involved in writing about no-place by adopting a narrative mode where such distinctions as fact vs. fiction are blurred. Thus she mixes scientific metaphors with ones from Celtic Fairy when she describes the "unborn" as "those who slip weightless among the molecules, dwelling where a century passes in a day, among the fair folk, under the great, bell-curved Hill of Possibility" (4). Later we will learn that in Valley literature all binary distinctions except the one between truth and lie are "messy" (500). Finally, this frame ends by involving the reader in the "only archaeology that might be practical":

You take your child or grandchild in your arms, a young baby, not a year old yet, and go down into the wild oats

in the field below the barn. Stand under the oak on the last slope of the hill, facing the creek. Stand quietly. Perhaps the baby will see something, or hear a voice, or speak to somebody there, somebody from home (5).

Besides introducing the Valley as "home," this passage applies the recurring metaphor of children directly to the reader.

Pandora undergoes two crises of conscience – one involving her role as artist and the other her role as representative of Civilisation. In her aesthetic crisis Pandora rejects the image of herself as perverse astronomer, looking "into the big end of the telescope and see[ing], jewel-bright, distinct, tiny, and entire, the Valley" (53). Pandora counteracts this false seeing by rushing out of the observatory "with her eyes shut, grabbing, grabbing with her hands" (53). Her insistence on touch gains her "lifesize," pieces of the Valley. Thus she only finds the true "pattern" of the Valley by rejecting the false completeness of the dolls' house and by accepting the broken bowl her hands find. The other critical aspect to Valley aesthetics for Pandora is the recognition that the human must be rooted in the nonhuman. Pandora realizes that "the roots of the Valley are the roots of the digger pine. . . . The roots of the Valley are in wildness, in dreaming, in dying, in eternity" (52). Later, she affirms the "Infinite good" that can result from our imaginative sympathy with the wild things that have "nothing to do with us" (241). These "wilderness sections" revise the traditional notion of utopia as a state where every bit of nature is beautifully domesticated or "humanized."

In summary then, "Let the heart complete the pattern" (53) is Pandora's Lesson" in her aesthetic crisis of conscience; the one involving her status as representative of civilization in "Pandora Worrying About What She Is Doing: She Addresses The Reader With Agitation" (147-8) is not so directly resolved. But it is this crisis that accounts for her mythical persona, and it is this one that creates the most poignancy since Pandora presents herself as a writer of utopia who cannot imagine a historical connection between her society and her fiction. The only way she can imagine getting from one to another is through an apocalyptic ending of our world. First she explains guiltily that she has burned all the books and killed off all the starving babies – those "puny little bastards" in order to create the Valley; "You may have noticed that the real difference between us and the Valley is quite a small thing really. There are not too many of them" (147). Then she meditates on her mythical persona, explaining that as Pandora she cannot give the Valley people history, only *time*. This ability to give time is "a native gift" of the Pandora who, in Le Guin's revision of the myth, knew exactly what would come out of the infamous box:

I knew what would come out of it! I know about the Greeks bearing gifts! I know about war and plague and famine and holocaust, indeed I do. Am I not a daughter of the people who enslaved and extirpated the peoples of

three continents? Am I not a sister of Adolf Hitler and Anne Frank? Am I not a citizen of the State that fought the first nuclear war? (147)

She remarks that she hopes Prometheus was right about Hope being at the bottom of the box, but that she won't mind if the box is only *empty*. She then switches into the mindset of the Kesh who view all things in nature as "people" sharing "houses." She hopes for: "room enough! A big room, that holds animals, birds, fish, bugs, trees. . . . A living room" (148).

"Pandora Worrying" ends enigmatically, with an anecdote of childbirth in the backseat of a car, overlaid with Pandora still offering her gift of time. But the modulation into Valley metaphors, and the emphasis of time or room over history do not erase the apocalyptic uneasiness of the section. Le Guin's narrator seems dissatisfied with the traditional utopian thinking which can imagine a better world but cannot depict the process of getting there. Pandora's myth exemplifies this dilemma: one ill, one horror, follows another out of the "box" until it is apocalyptically "empty" – only then can a new world perhaps begin.

Pandora's crisis implicates the reader. She jeers: "Do you take me for innocent, my fellow maggot, colluding Reader?" (148). About the destruction of books and babies she says "If they burn, it will be all of us that burned them" (147). Thus, the reader vicariously undergoes with Pandora this crisis of conscience. In the long section immediately following "Pandora Worrying," the reader's "ordeal" shifts to receiving the Valley people's satirical tales of the gap between their world and ours.

In this section, "Time and the City," Pandora appears in her role as ethnologist though not a neutral one. Le Guin here gives us an ironic inversion of Pandora's anxious inability to give the Valley people a history. The Kesh name "history": "when they lived outside the world" (152). The Kesh prefer spatial to temporal images; thus the inside/outside metaphor. The odd inversion occurs when Pandora remarks that although she's "not sure" she thinks that the Kesh perceive "the gap or lack of connection" between themselves and civilization "as the most important thing – to them. . . about history in our terms" (153). There are a couple of paradoxes here. It is an ironic reversal for the utopian community to be puzzled by their own origin, by their lack of connection to a former, or other, non-utopian society. This concern with how to get from here to there is more typically a "pre-utopian" one. And here is the second paradox: if Pandora cannot give them history (147) of course the Valley people will be likewise unclear on how to get "from 'inside'.. to 'outside'.. and back" (153). Thus, we have Pandora, self-conscious utopian writer, gravely reporting that the Kesh are self-conscious of "this discontinuity" (153), between them and us. The self-reflexivity is heightened by Pandora's explaining in her anthropological way that the gap is also "the hinge" (153), which formerly has been described as both

the center of the Valley town, and as an aspect of "heya" whose meaning include connection, hinge, center, change (151). Thus, what was formerly an aspect of Valley culture – the hinge – is now a self-conscious image for the "connective discontinuity" between us and utopia.

A final inversion in this section is one of perspective. Instead of pondering Pandora's creation of the elaborate Valley culture, the reader views our society through the satiric narratives of the Kesh. For example, the tale "Big Man and Little Man" is a mythical account of the inside/outside metaphor. It is also a critical translation of *Genesis*. Big Man, who crowds all the room outside the world can only see inside the world backwards; he sends his backward-headed creation, Little Man, inside. Little Man populates the world with "a thing like a woman out of dirt" that Big Man fools him with. Little Man then kills or poisons everything in the world because: "He didn't belong there inside the world, he had no mother, only a father" (158). He finally dies of fear and the world comes alive with the animals and other people Little Man somehow overlooked. In "A Note On the Backward-Head People," Pandora discursively presents the ethics imaged in this tale. She notes that the backward-head people "seem to have been the literalisation of a metaphor" (159). The Kesh are surrounded with evidence of our values; vast regions poisoned with radiation, as well as the various genetic impairments they suffer. Since the Valley people believe that human beings do not do things accidentally, they see the perpetrators of these damages as having "done wrong mindfully" – thus – "They had had their heads on wrong" (159).

The one historical connection readily grasped between civilization and the Valley is this one of our destruction of the earth. The self-reflexivity of *Always Coming Home* thus does not prevent the Valley culture from being a point of view from which to satirize our world. In fact, such a satirical function highlights the discontinuity between utopia and "reality." Thus in "Time and the City," the hinge does not effect a leap between inside and outside – it remains within the Valley. For example, the mini-drama of origins called "Coyote was Responsible" reaffirms the Valley's celebration of story-telling and of metaphor. The "Five People" who seek the answer to "Where did we come from?" reject both the "Wise Old Man," who declares "From the mind of the Eternal" and the "Old Talking Woman" who replies "From the beginnings of the Earth! In the sperm, in the egg. . . ." (162). The Five People don't want the philosophical or scientific explanation; instead they accept Coyote's poetic-adventurous tale: "From the west you came, from the west, over the ocean, dancing you came walking you came" (162). The response of the Five People – "What luck, to have got here to the Valley!" – seems to say a joyous "so what" to the problem of imagining a historical beginning to utopia. But "Time and the City" ends with sadness over the fact that such affirmations are only possible within the Valley. In Pandora's

concluding conversation with a Valley Archivist, they politely disagree over the importance of history. The latter finally asks Pandora to define history. Pandora says: "A great historian of my people said: the study of Man in Time." But she adds: "You aren't Man and you don't live in Time... You live in the Dream Time." "Always" says the Archivist. "Right through Civilization, we have lived in the Dream Time" (172). The "Bitter grief" in the Archivist's voice is not intelligible in terms of her character. Rather it is another dramatization of the oscillation between affirmation and doubt, which comprises utopian hope in *Always Coming Home*.

Although Le Guin's latest exploration of "no-place" is open-ended in its self-consciousness over utopia's seemingly impossible relation to history, it nonetheless means us to come away from the novel admiring and even longing for the Valley. This intention is illustrated by several points of affirmation in the "return" phase of Pandora's and the reader's circular journeys. Through Pandora's frequent addresses to her audience, she and we, her readers, have been united, both by our guilt as participants in an oppressive society – basically the Caucasian First World – and by our corresponding inability to imagine a historical beginning to "utopia" without an apocalypse. This guilt has no "solution" in the novel except perhaps the necessity of acknowledging it and then going on, or returning, to the work of imagining utopia. Thus, one of the points of affirmation occurs in the section "Pandora Gently to the Gentle Reader" (339), in which she imagines leading an overzealous reader into the Valley. Pandora's and the reader's interdependence is emphasized: she begins "When I take you to the Valley," and ends "we have a long way yet to go, and I can't go without you" (339). The motif of the hope in Pandora's box also recurs here when she says: "We'll go on, I hope and we'll see the roofs of the little towns..." (339). The "I hope" reminds us of the tenuousness of utopian hope even as it indicates Pandora's dependence on the reader's willingness to travel with her.

Pandora and the reader also arrive separately at moments of affirmation. Pandora writes three poems that show that the paradoxes that have caused her anxiety are now resolved, but inside or from the Valley. She openly allies herself with the Kesh mentality that prefers Coyote's origin myth and says "What luck, to have got here to the Valley!" (162) when she says in one of the poems "I don't care if I am possible" (487). This poem ("Newton Did Not Sleep Here") explains that the bridges between our world and the Valley are "Wind, the rainbow, / mist, still air" and that we can and must learn to walk on them.

While Pandora's resolution comes when she asserts her identity as Valley poet, we the readers are brought into closest contact with the Kesh by a poem written by them to us: "From the People of the Houses of Earth in the Valley to the Other People Who Were On Earth Before Them" (404-05). This poem brings the recurring metaphor of

children full circle: here the Kesh explain that they have always been among us as the "other" – the "sold woman," the "enslaved enemy," the "hungry" and "the powerless" and finally "the children" that we did not know:

We were the words you had no language for.  
O our fathers and mothers!  
We were always your children.  
From the beginning, from the beginning,  
we are your children. (405)

The effect of this affirmation is critical or open-ended because it asserts that the responsibility for having helped to imagining utopia is defined by our responsibility for having helped imagine this real world into being. In this double responsibility lies the possibility of utopia. Perhaps more than time this is Pandora's gift to us. \*

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### Tegner's Saga, continued from page 56

#### Endnotes

1. Through his mother Esaias Tegnér was related to some other important authors: Erik Gustaf Geijer, who lived at the same time as Tegnér and knew him personally. He was an historian (I think Karl Marx had read his works), poet and author of some hymns. He was also a famous apostate from political conservatism to liberalism. His change of view is by some called his apostasy. Gustaf Fröding, a poet who lived at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. He is still a popular author whose poems have in many cases been made into songs. Selma Lagerlöf the Nobel Prize winner, and author of some great novels. They were all born in the province of Värmland. Selma Lagerlöf and Gustaf Fröding were two of the leading authors in the literature of the 1890s, when fantasy and saga returned to Swedish literature after a period of naturalism and realism. Then authors retold tales from their home provinces reviving the interest in local folklore. Värmland's inhabitants became known as a joyful and a little bit crazy people.
2. The most important phonoscript was Per Daniel Amadeus Atterborn, a poet who is remembered as the author of fairy-tale play called *Lyskägglens Ö* (The Island of Bliss). The great part of his and the other Swedish romanticists' productions are not read today except by students of literature. There are some authors in Swedish literature who mixed romanticism and other influences who have survived.
3. Today, "hej" is the normal, familiar word of greeting.
4. This is the same Swedish Academy that administers the Nobel Prize of Literature. It was founded in 1786 by King Gustaf III, as part of his efforts to sponsor literature and art. It had the French Academy as a model. It edits a large dictionary of the Swedish language and promotes literature.
5. For those unfamiliar with the ecclesiastical situation in Sweden, after the Lutheran Reformation the Church of Sweden became the only and established state church. This continued until the late 19th century when different denominations, such as Baptists, came and were allowed to exist as Sweden became an increasingly modern, democratic society. The Church of Sweden is still the established church, a situation similar to that in England.